Myth vs. Reality: Nutrition Labeling at Fast-Food and Other Chain Restaurants

Myth: Restaurant nutrition labeling will force mom and pop restaurants out of business.

Reality: The proposed legislation would apply only to restaurants that belong to chains with 10 or more outlets. Small business owners would not be affected by this legislation.

Myth: Special orders are common, and it would be impossible for a menu to list nutrition information for all possible different food preparation options and combinations.

Reality: The bill would require fast-food and other chain restaurants to provide nutrition information for menu items as **"offered for sale."** It does not apply to customized orders or to daily specials (which are not standard menu items). If restaurants can provide nutrition information on websites and brochures, they should be able to do so on menus and menu boards. Even if people customize their orders, providing nutrition information for standard menu items at chain restaurants would provide a good basis for comparison from which customers could make informed choices.

Myth: The current system of voluntary labeling at restaurants is adequate.

Reality: Under the current system of voluntary labeling, half of the largest chain restaurants do not provide any nutrition information about their food to their customers. We know of no restaurants that provide calorie labeling for all menu items directly on menus or menu boards. A system requiring all chain restaurants to provide nutritional information on menus and menu boards would provide a level playing field in a highly competitive industry.

Myth: People already have access to nutrition labeling at restaurants.

Reality: The approximately one-half of restaurants that do provide nutrition information usually do so on websites, which have to be accessed before leaving for the restaurant, or on hard-to-find and difficult-to-read posters or brochures in their stores. Placing the nutrition information on the menu or menu board would be right at the point of decision making, more convenient, and easier to use.

Myth: Nutrition labeling at fast-food and other chain restaurants will not help to reduce obesity because people eat out so infrequently.

Reality: Americans are relying increasingly on restaurants to feed themselves and their families – restaurants are not just for special occasions any more. Americans are eating out twice as much as in 1970. Adults and children eat about one-third of their calories from restaurants and other food service establishments. On a typical day, the National Restaurant Association (NRA) estimates that more than four out of ten adults patronize restaurants.

Providing nutrition information at chain restaurants would provide an important tool to allow people to make informed choices for a significant and growing part of their diets. Eating out is

associated with higher calorie intakes and higher body weights. Children eat almost twice as many calories when they eat a meal at a restaurant compared to at home (770 versus 420 calories). Portion sizes at restaurants often are large and for just a little more money customers can upgrade to larger serving sizes. Restaurant meals often provide a half to a whole day's worth of calories.

Myth: When people eat out they want to splurge and do not want nutrition information.

Reality: While people may choose to ignore nutrition information on certain occasions, two-thirds of Americans support requiring restaurants to list nutrition information, such as calories, on menus, according to four nationally representative surveys.

Myth: The cost of nutrition labeling would drive chain restaurants out of business.

Reality: Half of the largest chain restaurants already provide nutrition information on their websites and would not incur any new costs for analyzing their products. The cost to have a product analyzed is about $230 per menu item. A restaurant chain with 80 menu items would incur a *one-time* cost of approximately $18,000 to have all its menu items tested – less than ten dollars for each Denny's outlet.

The cost of redesigning menus and menu boards would be modest. Many chain restaurants centralize menu development and printing and restaurant headquarters incur the costs.

Myth: Nutrition labeling at restaurants is a radical idea advocated by the "food police" trying to tell us what we can and can not eat.

Reality: Nutrition labeling would not limit choices at restaurants. It simply would provide information regarding those choices. Supporters of better nutrition information at restaurants include:

- The U.S. Surgeon General and Department of Health and Human Services' "Call to Action" on obesity recommends "increasing availability of nutrition information for foods eaten and prepared away from home."
- Seventeen cities, states and territories have introduced legislation to require better nutrition information at fast-food and other chain restaurants.
- Two-thirds of Americans support requiring nutrition labeling of restaurant foods.

Myth: Nutrition labeling on packaged foods in supermarkets has not been effective in helping people to make healthier food choices.

Reality: Americans rank nutrition second only to taste as the factor most frequently influencing food purchases. Three-fourths of adults report using food labels. People who read nutrition labels are more likely to have a diet lower in fat and cholesterol and higher in vitamin C. Also, packaged-food labeling has resulted in reformulation of existing products to improve their nutritional quality, as well as the introduction of new nutritionally-improved (low-fat, low-sodium, etc.) products. Finally, the rise in obesity rates began well before Nutrition Facts labels were required on packaged foods. Nutrition Facts labels

have only been required on packaged foods since 1994. Obesity rates started to increase in 1980.

Myth: Menu labeling is not necessary because restaurants already provide a wide variety of foods to meet any individual's dietary needs.

Reality: The nutritional quality of restaurant meals varies and a range of options is usually available. However, without nutrition information, it is difficult to compare options and make informed decisions. Studies show that estimating the calorie and fat content of restaurant foods is difficult, even for nutrition professionals. Few people would guess that a tuna salad sandwich from a typical deli has 50% more calories than a roast beef with mustard or that small milkshake has more calories than a Big Mac.

Myth: Physical inactivity is primarily responsible for obesity – unhealthy eating habits play only a minor role.

Reality: The high levels of obesity in the U.S. are attributable to both unhealthy eating and physical inactivity, and both must be addressed to help reduce obesity, heart disease, cancer and other diseases. Most Americans are not getting the recommended amount of physical activity. However, existing data and societal trends suggest that activity levels were already low by 1980, when obesity rates started to increase. Many major societal trends leading to decreased physical activity occurred before 1980 – the move to the suburbs, shift to an information economy and more desk jobs, reliance on the car, and wide availability of labor-saving devices. It is not clear whether further declines in physical activity have occurred since then.

In contrast, the data and societal trends are clear regarding the importance of increased caloric intake in driving the rising obesity rates. National surveys and food-supply data show that adults and children are consuming more calories (about 168 more calories per day for men and 335 more calories per day for women between 1971 and 2000). In addition, since 1980, there have been increases in portion sizes, eating out, and soft drink intake.

It would require a great deal of physical activity to burn off the calories in many popular restaurant foods and meals.

Food	Calories	Activity Requirement (for average-sized woman)
Quarter Pounder with Cheese Extra Value Meal (large)	1,380 cal	1 hour and 50 minutes of running
Cheese Fries with Ranch Dressing	3,010 cal	10 hours and 40 minutes of brisk walking
20 oz. Coke	250 cal	1 hour of biking

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